

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

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BLACK CAUCUS: SENATE BUDGET PLAN MUST HAVE FUNDING EQUITY, CLOSE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

INDIANAPOLIS – As the Indiana Senate begins deliberations on a new biennial state budget, members of the Indiana Black Legislative Caucus asked today that senators reject a House Republican plan to cut school funding in favor of an effort to give funding equity for all schools across the state.

"It is heartening to see that the Indiana Senate appears to be preparing its own budget proposal, rather than accept a budget crafted by the House Republicans that cuts funding for schools and health care and raises property taxes throughout Indiana," said State Rep. Greg Porter (D-Indianapolis), chairman of the Black Legislative Caucus.

"If anything, I think the House Republicans have provided a roadmap for how not to write a budget," Porter added. "In past years, we often have referred to the Senate as the killing fields, because that's where so many good bills have gone to die. This is one occasion where we will applaud state senators for getting rid of a bill from the House."

A crucial first step in enacting a just budget will be putting an equitable school funding formula into place.

"Education funding should be our first priority in writing a new budget," Porter said. "The House Republican proposals will create a two-tiered system in public education, with the haves getting the lion's share of the money, and the have-nots getting fewer dollars and being forced into cutting programs, laying off teachers and increasing class sizes."

Porter said the Legislature must take steps to ensure that schools get minimum state funding guarantees. The House Republican formula provides no guarantee, and directs most new funding toward a select few schools. As a result, local school officials will be forced into funding deficiencies through program cuts, tax increases or both.

"This wrong-headed decision will have a disastrous effect on both rural and urban schools in Indiana," Porter said. "In addition to depriving schools of needed state support, this budget does not fully fund the tuition support deficiency, which is estimated at \$58 million, or textbooks for qualified students or ISTEP remediation."

By cutting funds for remediation, State Rep. Vernon G. Smith (D-Gary) said the House Republican budget helps perpetuate the academic achievement gap between white and non-white students in Indiana. Smith cited a recent Rand study that shows minority students are more likely than white students to be taught by unqualified teachers.

"We'll never eliminate the academic achievement gap with the mediocre funding outlined in the House Republican budget proposal," Smith said. "If you are going to close this gap, you've got invest more in education, not less."

Both Smith and Porter said they recognized the difficulty of the task facing the Senate, since recent reports indicate that collected revenues are lagging behind projections by more than \$90 million.

"These reports from the State Budget Agency help make a budget that was already out of balance and fiscally irresponsible even worse," Porter said. "With all of these roadblocks in place, it is obvious that the best thing for the Senate to do is start over on writing a budget, and focusing on improving education funding."

"The Black Legislative Caucus is making school funding our top priority for the budget in the final weeks of this 2005 session. Our goal will be to make sure that schools in rural and urban Indiana are not left behind," Porter concluded.

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